DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 760 FL 017 547

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TITLE Language and Culture Immersion: A Winning Enterprise.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (New York, NY, April 9, 1988) and at the International Studies Association Meeting (St. Louis, MO, March 30, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *College Second Language Programs; Cross Cultural Training; *Curriculum Development; Dramatic Play; Higher Education; *Immersion Programs; *Instructional Effectiveness; Modern Language Curriculum; Peer Teaching; Program Descriptions; Second Language Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Dartmouth Rassias Method; Wilson College PA

ABSTRACT

A second language program developed at Wilson College (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania) with a federal grant uses the Rassias Method of theatrical, dramatic language saturation. In the first application of the program at the college, peer tutors (who would be assistant teachers in the subsequent immersion program) were trained in a three-day workshop. Immediately following the workshop, a ten-day immersion course brought together 15 students of three languages (French, German, and Spanish) in classes taught by master teachers and the peer tutors. Participant evaluations were positive but revealed areas for course improvement, particularly in timing and ability grouping. Business language courses in all three languages were introduced into the college curriculum after the first immersion course. Internships intended to begin after the second offering of the immersion courses were suspended due to international incidents. The third offering of the immersion course was undersubscribed, but the fourth offering was successful, serving college students, teachers, and individuals interested in self-enrichment. A total of nine courses have been added to the college curriculum as a result of the initial immersion effort. Additional results include a program of distance learning in French. Internships have not developed as intended, but graduate credit courses for teachers may become a program by-product. Additional ideas are being pursued. (MSE)

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ED298760

Paper presented at the International Studies Association Meeting, International Education, Section, "The International Studies Curriculum: Enhancing and Assessing Students' Global Awareness," St. Louis, March 30, 1988

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Language and Culture Immersion: A Winning Enterprise

Over the past ten years, the rationale for applied language studies in American academe has become well established.[1] The case has been most forcefully stated since 1979-80--when the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies issued its report, and Paul Simon (now senator, D-IL) published his alarming book, The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign-Language Crisis.

These and numerous other reports have made clear the dangers of both monolingualism and intolerance inherent in America's old "melting pot" philosophy.

It is precisely a stereotypical ethnocentrism that has begun to undermine America's once-touted export-import and entrepreneurial commerce. The USA, no longer the front-runner of business development, needs to market, promote, and sell its products and services as a multilingual, myriad-cultured nation.

Why is it that the businessmen from Tokyo have been able all along to speak flawless English, while there are still today very few American businessmen who can utter even a single phrase of Japanese? We believe the answer lies far deeper than in just a lack of inclination, formal education, or talent. The problem arises from a need for international-cultural etiquette or manners which the average untraveled, untutored, and parochial American unfortunately lacks.

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Everyone is expected to speak English fluently and measure "by the yard" (and not the meter!).

Unlike a fine, full-bodied, classic red Bordeaux wine, the average American businessman does not travel well. Uprooted, he withers. The program at Wilson College has aimed at attacking monolingualism and redressing international affiliations. This will doubtless cultivate the free enterprise sector of American commerce by providing it with well-qualified and well-educated business people.

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The U.S. Department of Education grant secured by Wilson aimed to enhance and strengthen not only the undergraduate foreign language and literature curriculum, but also linguistic abilities in the community and, in its farthest reaching effect, in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This, we believe, will bolster the whole American economy. By making people aware of the importance of language education, as part of the Liberal Arts, and of their consequential effects on economic development, we intend to nullify any precept of American inferiority and reject any attempt to bring America to her knees linguistically.

We are thus determined and totally committed to the principles of cosmopolitan multilingualism that will lead to a sympathetic appreciation for other cultures and languages. This, we have no doubt, will lead to the greater economic vigor and to the free, individual, enterprising spirit promised in "Mandate II."

PHASE I--THE METHOD

The Rassias Method was developed at Dartmouth College in the mid-1960's and was originally used to teach Peace Corps volunteers a new language quickly, efficiently, and indelibly. "Energy" and "drama" best describe how the Method works. Master Teachers (the professors of the target language) and the Peer Tutors stimulate the student/learners by exacting rapid-fire responses and enthusiastic, firebrand participation. This effort secures and harnesses at once an emotional and an intellectual reaction that enhances the whole learning process.

The students are encouraged to communicate on a non-threatening, human level; mistakes are allowed, encouraged even, so that one may learn from them. Often the teacher will mime or act out a situation, word, or phrase in order to present an image that correlates to a word or definition, etc., in the target language (rather than translating unnaturally into English and then back to the target language). Body movements, rhythms, and gestures are a language unto themselves and constitute the essence of communication skills.

The Method is thus a theatrical, dramatic portrayal of language teaching that demands responsiveness. It is through the continual stress on both relevant contextuality and n drama that the student retains a greater amount of knowledge than in a conventional classroom.

PHASE II--THE DARTMOUTH MODEL AT WILSON COLLEGE, JANUARY 1986

Since the summer 1982, John Rassias has pioneered another new educational concept: the ten-day total language saturation. At first directed at Dartmouth alumni, the program has now grown considerably, to the extent that a separate ten-day period must be devoted to French exclusively, followed by a second ten-day period for other languages. Because of the Project Director's personal involvement at Dartmouth as a Master Teacher in French since 1983, it seemed logical to attempt to translate the model to the Cumberland Valley and to Wilson College.

A. THE WORKSHOP

As with most Dartmouth-Model type programs, we began with teacher training--a three-day workshop designed to train "peer tutors" (assistant teachers in the subsequent Immersion program) in the Rassias Method. The participants, some of whom were high school language teachers from outside the undergraduate women's college, were taught the choreography, i.e., body movements that seek to inspire and stimulate the student/learners. The exercises they employed and by which they learned were videotaped for effective feedback. The Workshop concluded with a formal presentation to a jury of experienced teachers who evaluated the Peer Tutors using animation, technique, and pronunciation as criteria.

B. THE IMMERSION

Immediately following the Workshop, we began a ten-day Immersion in which fifteen students participated, eight in French, four in German, and three in Spanish. To begin the course officially, the students took an "oath of true language immersion" (following the opening banquet)--after which no English was allowed to be spoken for the next ten days.

The classes during the day were taught twice by the Master Teachers, who covered grammar and structure, and six times by the Peer Tutors, who worked with the students on drills, repetition, and reinforcement exercises. Every class was followed by a short break--for coffee, tea, etc. The materials used were, in general, a grammar book and a cultural anthology.

Outside the class, everyone took meals at their language tables and relaxed together. Evening cultural-recreational activities were offered, e.g., computer software activities, videotape and other audio-visual learning materials were presented, etc. During this time the students also developed short dramatic skits to be performed in the target language prior to the last day of classes.

On the tenth day all the participants, Peer Tutors, Master Teachers, and guests attended a graduation ceremony and banquet. The participants received a certificate of achievement presented to them by their Master Teachers.

PHASE III--EVALUATIONS

Following the Immersion, the evaluations submitted by the participants revealed in general that the students were interested in the Immersion program mainly to improve language skills. Most of them felt that the quality of instruction was high and they liked the intensity and individual attention. But nearly all commented on the lack of time for study and expressed concern about the varying levels of ability in the classes.

The most helpful suggestions were: a separation of students based on levels of ability, more time to prepare for classes, more vocabulary, a total separation from the outside world, and a one day break to digest material.

PHASE IV--BUSINESS LANGUAGE COURSES AND INTERNSHIPS

The second most important element in this program, after the ten-day immersion, is in fact the keystone. Business French, Business German, and Business Spanish are new courses in the Wilson foreign language curriculum, and all three were offered during the spring semester 1986, with a total enrollment of about fifteen undergraduates. These courses covered such areas as business correspondence in the target language, economic and industrial organization (France, Germany, Spain and Latin America), the European Common Market, agriculture, accounting procedures and computers, marketing, credit and international banking, insurance, transportation, personnel and job search, unions, the stock market, energy issues, customs, postal matters and telecommunications, real estate and taxes.

The highlight of the Business French course, taught by the Project Director, was a visit to the National Gallery to view the French Impressionists exhibit (March 1986), followed by a talk by museum personnel on the logistical and organizational facets of such an exhibit (interface with French museum officials to allow their great Impressionist masterpieces to travel).

PHASE V--JUNE 1986

The second series of immersion courses was held on the Wilson College campus on the dates projected (June 11-22, 1986, with the addition of one day to account for no classes Sunday, 15 June). Enrollments were about the same as in January 1986.

The major alteration to the January program was the attempt to give students a deserved break on Sunday June 15 by cancelling all classes (normally, classes are cancelled in the morning only). But we found that this break was, in fact, more distracting than beneficial. A few quotations from the evaluations will be enlightening: "The Master Class sessions were very informative and enjoyable." "Both German instructors were excellent!" "The Spanish table, Peer Tutor, and Master Teacher were superb!" "The informal conversations with the Peer Tutors, who are more fluent than you, were especially helpful." "The mix of Beginner and Intermediate students was very frustrating."

PHASE VII--INTERNSHIPS

However, the proof of the effectiveness of the whole exercise, as described, was to be made apparent in the internships undertaken by several undergraduates during the summer of 1986. Unfortunately, Col. Qaddafi had other plans for our students and the international assignments we had hoped to find for them became less attractive. We still expect to be able to send (summer 1987) at least one student to Paris (or even to New York City or Washington, D.C.) to work with a multinational company (doing business in a French-speaking country); plus two others who could spend July-August at a French equitation school; yet another to spend a month in a small American multinational machine tool company with extensive dealing in Germany.

PHASE VIII--JANUARY 1987, IMMERSION III

Plans for the January immersion, 1987 (interim term) were laid in the spring and summer of 1986. Efforts were made to secure outside funding to expand the program by subsidizing the creation of an intensive-accelerated Japanese language program (to begin June 1987)--as projected in the original grant proposal.

This January series was to be supported by additional outside funds, which were unsuccessfully sought.

Also, because of other budgetary and personnel limitations, the French Immersion sequence alone was proposed and arranged (at a location in Harrisburg, for January 8-18), but could not be offered for lack of sufficient enrollments.

This disappointing development was countered by our early plans for the June 1987 sequence (Immersion IV), for all three languages, to be conducted once again on the Wilson campus.

PHASE IX--JUNE 1987, IMMERSION IV

Planning for Immersion IV, 11-21 June 1987 was well under way by March 1987. The three course sequence, French, German, and Spanish, was highlighted in the Wilson College Summer Credit courses brochure. More advertising stimulated community interest this time, although the actual numbers in terms of enrollments were still disappointing. Seven students registered in French, four in German, and, although we did have two official registrants in Spanish, it was decided that the number was too small to sustain an intensive class.

A two-day Rassias Method teacher training workshop was held June 10 and 11 at Wilson, followed by the Immersion course, June 11-21.

As was the case previously, topics covered in the Workshop included teacher preparation and enthusiasm, dramatic and other techniques, correction of errors, rewards, position and presence, pace, voice, and movement. Hundreds of foreign language teachers in the Adams, Cumberland, and Franklin county areas and beyond were sent announcements describing the Workshop. Though many were invited, very few attended.

The tuition for the Immersion course was set at $649.; this time an all-inclusive fee that covered on-campus lodging and meals, about 80 hours of instruction, and textbooks.

The course was open to students at the advanced beginner level (i.e., those with some previous experience in basic grammar and vocabulary were admitted). As usual, the stress was on everyday human communication. Oral proficiency criteria and conversational skills were emphasized.

As before, daily language tables at meal times and a variety of lively auxiliary learning materials helped to keep the focus on language and its structure for the ten days without interruption and without the use of English. Leisurely evening cultural hours emphasize further the subtleties of the target country's values and rhythms.

Over thirty per cent of the enrolled students in this Immersion sequence came from Wilson's traditional women's college (three of eleven). Two students in French were employed as teachers seeking certification or re-certification--to upgrade skills. Three individuals in French and three in German were interested mainly in self-enrichment. The graduation speaker for this immersion sequence was J. Edward Beck, a local businessman involved in multinational trade and a graduate of an earlier German immersion course.

Pre-program goals and objectives, as acknowledged by the participants themselves, included being able to speak and think in the target language, to improve understanding of the target language, to strengthen confidence and self-assurance on the job, to increase the likelihood of travel abroad, to improve teaching skills, and to improve understanding of another culture.

Final student evaluations focused on the difficulties of absorbing a large mass of material in so short a time, the frustrations of wanting to move more quickly through the grammar, in some cases, and, in others, of wishing more time could be spent on detailed grammatical explanations. Students also felt that more free, recreational time would have been beneficial. On the other hand, teacher enthusiasm (both Master Teacher and Peer Tutor) was praised, the camaraderie and inter-generational communication was appreciated, the textbooks were clear and detailed, and the intense learning was viewed as extremely effective.

REMARKS--EFFECTS ON THE CURRICULUM

New undergraduate credit courses that were created and offered as a direct result of the Department of Education grant:

1. French Immersion I (formerly listed as Entrepreneurial French I).
2. German Immersion I (formerly listed as Entrepreneurial German I).
3. Spanish Immersion I (formerly listed as Entrepreneurial Spanish I).
4. French Immersion II (formerly listed as Entrepreneurial French II).
5. German Immersion II (formerly listed as Entrepreneurial German II).
6. Spanish Immersion II (formerly listed as Entrepreneurial Spanish II).

(Offered January 1986: 1,2,3; offered June 1986: 4,2,6; offered January 1987: 1 [cancelled for lack of enrollment]; offered June 1987: 4,5).

7. Business French (French 216; formerly listed as Executive French; offered spring 1986, spring 1987 [as an evening course]).
8. Business German (German 216; formerly listed as Executive German; offered spring 1986).
9. Business Spanish (Spanish 216; formerly listed as Executive Spanish; offered spring 1986, spring 1987).

PROJECTED GOALS--ACHIEVED GOALS

One of the principal objectives of the grant project has been to improve the quality of foreign language learning and instruction at Wilson through (a) the introduction of intensive immersion courses in the three languages, and (b) the creation of new business language courses. From the above-captioned indications, this goal has clearly been met.

Another objective was to add a new dimension to the study of international business at Wilson through the development and grounding of a small business component that focuses on exporting and importing, leading to the creation of a small business concentration within the College's Business and Economics major. The Wilson faculty approved the small business concentration, which was offered first spring semester 1986.

A further objective was to integrate rigorous and in-depth instruction in foreign languages and cultures into other areas of the College's curriculum, including programs in marketing, management and supervision, and equestrian studies. At the present time, foreign language study is required for equestrian studies majors; marketing and management majors are strongly urged to continue their foreign language studies beyond the proficiency requirement.

PHASE X--THE NEXT STEP

One new program at Wilson has contributed to the direct fulfillment of the original goals of the grant project, namely the Adult Learning Program. Created in 1986 to meet the growing needs of adults seeking to complete their college education, and to serve the wide market area from Harrisburg, PA to Hagerstown, MD, the ALP program has given impetus to the immersion portion of the present project and as well as presenting challenges to find ways to encourage these busy adults to continue the study of foreign languages beyond the basic proficiency requirement level. ALP students have come to view the immersion sequence as a relatively painless means to speed up their fulfillment of the language requirement.

A direct and significant by-product of the grant project was the development of French-By-Phone, modeled on a similar course at the Graduate School of Business and Commerce at the University of Lyon, France (where the Project Director studied, summer 1986, by means of a French government fellowship).

By means of French-By-Phone, students (non-beginners) were able to pursue the study of French via remote control, as it were. The professor calls the student twice a week at a pre-arranged hour; lessons are assigned and discussed; some exercises are sent through the mail; and monthly meetings ensure an opportunity for face-to-face learning of body language and for testing.

Thus, many of the original goals of the proposal have been realized in part or in whole. However, because of the smallness of the numbers involved, the final impact of our program may not be as significant as expected.

In spite of numerous letters to contact individuals in New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, PA, Paris, and Munich, the internship segment of the project could not be realized. It became obvious to the Project Director, for example, that the very notion of a paid internship was something French do not understand. Special efforts were made to contact several equestrian centers in France where, it was assumed, our students (having completed the two immersions and the business language course) would be welcomed. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

But, the Project Director is still continuing his efforts to set up internships (this time through an agency such as the Institute for International Education). Another, unexpected, development will give impetus to the whole grant project's initiatives, namely, the possibility of offering graduate credit to secondary teachers of foreign languages.

The notion of a credit package for teachers evolved through experience with the last immersion (June 1987). What will be proposed is a partnership with the public schools. That is, foreign language teachers seeking certification or re-certification will be encouraged to take the Rassias Method Workshop, the language immersion, then undertake a research project that relates directly to their classroom needs (linguistic, grammatical or cultural applications). As a result of a resetting of curricular goals and priorities at Wilson over the past year--under the impetus of a Middle States ten-year re-accreditation self-study--graduate credit can officially be granted by the college (precedent was set in the 1960's). In cooperation with the Education faculty and our new Teacher Intern Program Director, the Project Director looks forward to greater involvement with the Teacher Certification and Re-certification programs underway in Pennsylvania.

This feasibility is mentioned because it promises to be the mode by which the international scope of the grant project is vouchsafed at Wilson. That is to say, the direct involvement of the business community and of the business majors in the grant project has been less than encouraging.

On another front, several efforts were made by the Project Director to seek funding to underwrite the costs of mounting a Japanese immersion course, as scheduled, during January 1987 (or even during June 1987).

Not only were qualified personnel hard to locate, but funds for a feasibility study were not forthcoming (a formal application was made to the Matshusita Foundation).

The net effect of the Department of Education grant project continues to be felt at Wilson insofar as the institution remains deeply committed to internationalizing the whole curriculum. It is likely that the immersion courses will continue to be offered during summer--to meet the needs of secondary foreign language teachers. The business language courses represent a significant addition to the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum. With the help of the Department of Education funds, Wilson is off to a good start.

NOTES

[1] This paper formed the basis of a presentation at the International Studies Association Meeting, International Education Section, "The International Studies Curriculum: Enhancing and Assessing Students' Global Awareness," St. Louis, 30 March, 1988. I am grateful to Professor Harry Chernotsky, University of North Carolina at Charlotte for his interest.

Under the title "Language Immersion at Wilson College," the paper was also focus of a presentation in French at the Northeast Conference, New York City, April 9, 1988. I wish to acknowledge the supportive comments of Mrs. Elaine Baer, John Bartram High School, Philadelphia, and of Dr. Krueger Normand, Louisiana Department of Education.

"Immersion" is a term that has come to have a specific meaning in foreign language education, particularly for proponents of FLES; I propose the term "intensive immersion" to apply to the 10-day model developed originally by John Rassias for the summer All-Alumni Language Program at Dartmouth (1981 and following).

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